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Big Dave McLean
"Better The Devil You Know"
 the much anticipated follow-up to his Juno-Award nominated album
"Faded But Not Gone"

"Winnipeg's own Howlin' Wolf."
 -Baltimore Blues Society

Produced by Steve Dawson
 and featuring Kevin McNamee, Pete Kepke and Ann and Regis McCrary

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LIVE SHOW REVIEWS

The 8th Annual Brooklyn Folk Festival

St. Ann's Church / Brooklyn Heights, NY

[Live Show Reviews](#) | April 14th, 2016

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A genuine feeling of community can be an elusive thing in New York, and even elbow to elbow with fellow concert goers, a sense of one-upmanship often overtake musical camaraderie. The 8th Annual Brooklyn Folk Fest, which began last Friday and ended Sunday afternoon, was an unexpected and delightful exception to the norm, as New Yorkers from every borough filled up Saint Ann's church in Brooklyn Heights with revelry, friendship and, of course, music. My only regret is that I wasn't able to sing, dance and listen all the more. (If I start practicing now, I'll surely win next year's banjo toss.)

Upon entry to the historic Episcopal church, fest-goers were ushered into the rowdy Parish Hall, where vendors sold beer, food and various tokens (from musical instruments to healing crystals) and a string of bands ensured that dancing kept up into the night. Skalopy had the crowd riled up with their unique brand of folk cum ska when I first arrived on the sold-out Saturday night of the Fest, but I eventually pulled myself away and discovered the church itself, home to the Main Stage, which is astonishing with its towering, vaulted ceilings, stained glass and dark, wooden pews.

Feral Foster, a fixture at the Jalopy Theatre and School of Music (one of two organizations who put on the Fest), was on stage with his acoustic guitar, and all set, I kept craning my neck to see if he was accompanied by more than just a drummer—the man makes a mean, loud sound, and wowed the crowd with, among others, a blistering take on "Nearer, My God, To Thee."

Spirit Family Reunion took the stage next, a young NYC based group decked out with banjos, washboards and Bernie Sanders paraphernalia. The tight harmonies between

An album cover for 'Take Me to the Mardi Gras' by The Sweetwater Hillbillies. The cover features a watercolor-style illustration of a person in a mask and a band playing on a stage. The title 'The Sweetwater Hillbillies' and album name 'Take Me to the Mardi Gras' are printed in a stylized font. To the right of the cover, a list of names is displayed: Donny Carpenter, Angela Hacker, James LeBlanc, Gary Nichols, Spooner Oldham, Shane Rollo, and Travis Wammack. Below the list is a red button with the text 'CLICK HERE TO ORDER'.

The latest release by the Sweetwater Hillbillies
Take Me to the Mardi Gras
 "Travis Wammack, the fastest guitar playing I have ever heard in my life."
 - Greg Shaw, Rolling Stone Magazine

the male and female leads soared into the space, punctuated by stomps and claps in time that certainly got the audience worked up. A fitting symbol of the Folk Fest community, emcee and event producer Eli Smith stepped up with his harmonica to join them on a Woody Guthrie tune, "I Ain't Got No Home."



Spirit Family Reunion by Brian Geltner

of St. Ann's was never more appropriate than for the 27 year old, LA born performer; without a doubt, Paxton took us to church.



Feral Foster by Brian Geltner

stepped back in the Parish Hall to watch swing dancers, both professional and amateur, show off their moves to the music of **Jessy Carolina** and the Holy Crow Jazz Band, but hightailed it back the church for Jerron “Blind Boy” Paxton, who proved to be nothing short of a revelation. He’s not an unknown talent, having graced the cover of the *Village Voice* a while back, but the setting

Paxton's set also might be described as a musical history lesson. Starting on the grand piano, he played the fiddle, acoustic guitar, banjo and harmonica before he was done, ranging in style from an Irish reel to turn of the century American blues; if my count is accurate, he didn't play the same genre or the same instrument twice. "America's a mixed up place," he told us with a smile, "and I play some mixed up music." I immediately regretted opting for a balcony seat when I realized the church's acoustics couldn't quite project his words up to us. And as a tried and true bluesman, Paxton had a funny anecdote or curious introduction to each song, and much of it was garbled from my seat. But as recompense, when he played an old time blues song on acoustic guitar, you could hear the gentle thudding of stomping feet in the balcony picking up steam- soon the whole upper level roared in response and appreciation.

It's also worth noting (though truly, I could go on and on about this kid) that I didn't understand the art of the harmonica until Paxton delivered his virtuosic, barn burning solo piece. Fittingly, the audience went nuts. "Here's the song I was gonna win the harmonica contest with," he told us by way of introduction. Hey, no time for humility when you're that good. He even ended his set with another mini-lesson about Alan Lomax and one of his guitar heroes, Johnny St. Cyr. After a standing ovation for Paxton, the Parish Hall action was winding down, and the rest of the crowd gathered at the main stage for the final two acts of the evening.

Roy Williams and the Human Hands packed the stage (there are seven of them), and played a rowdy, high-energy set, but alas, there was just no holding a candle to Blind Boy before them, and I slipped back out into the cold, grey streets of Brooklyn Heights, dancing all the way, already missing my newfound family and eagerly awaiting Brooklyn Folk Festival 2017.

-Emily Gawlak



Jerron "Blind Boy" Paxton by Brian Geltner

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